

# The post-nuclear age

**Forget the traditional family. There are now three distinct models, associated with professionals, working-class natives and immigrants**

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IN THE future perhaps the only proudly traditional families left in Britain will be those of politicians, using their wives and children as props. Jon Cruddas, a prominent Labour Party strategist, says that “stable, secure families” are the “bedrock of our lives”. According to Iain Duncan Smith, the Conservative welfare secretary, the last government “cloaked neglect of the family under the veil of neutrality.” The prime minister wants to encourage marriage through a tax break. Yet society is changing beneath the politicians’ feet.

Since the 1980s the number of marriages has collapsed to Victorian levels. Divorces have climbed from 16,000 per year in 1945 to over 117,000 per year now. In 2011 the proportion of children born out of wedlock reached 47%, up from around a fifth in the 1980s. Birth rates and family sizes are well below their 1960s peaks. As Spencer Thompson of IPPR, a think-tank, puts it: “The two-parent, male-breadwinner family is basically extinct.”

Yet these trends, which seemed inexorable, are variously slowing, stopping and reversing. The proportion of marriages that dissolve quickly has fallen to levels last seen in the late 1970s (see chart 1). Meanwhile, according to data from the General Lifestyle Survey, the proportion of families headed by a single parent dropped from 27% in 2002 to 22% in 2011. Even the increase in the proportion of children born out of wedlock has slowed markedly, though it has not yet plateaued.

Fertility has unexpectedly recovered from its 1990s lows, pushing Britain’s birth rate back up almost to 1970s levels. At the start of this century, a hypothetical average British woman had just 1.63 children over her lifetime. Now she has 1.93. This is partly because of an influx of immigrants, who tend to have more children. But British-born women are having more babies, too. Remarkably, increasing fertility has coincided with later births. The average mother now has her first child at the age of 28, up from 24 in 1970.

Yet all this does not mean the old-fashioned nuclear family is back. Rather, the British family has splintered. There are now three broad family types, identified with the university-educated professional classes, the native working classes and immigrants. Each is going its own way.

The first, well-to-do, group has largely held to old-fashioned ideas about marriage. Among professionals, births within marriage are four times as common as births where the father is registered as absent from the household—a proportion that has hardly changed in the past decade. And in some ways the upper middle classes are coming to seem more orthodox.

Their fertility is rising, points out Ann Berrington, a demographer at the University of Southampton. Women married to senior managers or professional husbands now wait until they are almost 33 years old before having a child—four years longer than women married to less well-off husbands. As young upper-middle-class women entered university in large numbers in the 1990s, birth rates and marriage rates dropped as children were put off in favour of careers. They are now making up for lost time.

The second group, composed of people doing “routine” or “semi-routine” (ie, blue-collar) jobs, is going in the opposite direction. In 2001, 53% of these workers were married—now just 44% are. They are ever more likely to have children out of wedlock. The British working classes have always had different social mores to the middle classes. Even in the 1940s working-class audiences thought “Brief Encounter”, a film in which a middle-class wife resists adultery, ludicrous. According to a Mass Observation study of the period, perhaps a fifth of women committed adultery.

The sharp decline of marriage among manual workers partly reflects the fact that working-class people were never quite as committed to the institution anyway. But it may also be down to the relative decline of working-class men’s earning power. A study by the Resolution Foundation, a think-tank, found that between 1968 and 2008 women accounted for three times more of working class families’ income growth than men. Coupled with a more generous welfare system, this has made women far less dependent on a man’s income to raise children.

## Foreign fusion

The final family group is composed of immigrants. Whether Bangladeshi or Polish, newcomers tend to be conservative. Overall, some 75% of the children of foreign-born mothers are born within marriage, far higher than the figure of 46% for British-born mothers. In some groups, such as Indians, who tend to marry young and have children quickly, illegitimacy is almost unheard of (see chart 2).

Foreign-born women now make up a quarter of new mothers in Britain, and over half in London. There are lots of children born to young Asian women in their early 20s, and lots born to professional mothers in their 30s—but few in between. Still, foreigners and ethnic minorities seem to be gradually converging on white British norms. They are marrying less, divorcing more and having fewer children.

In this confusing new world, it is hard to talk about a traditional family type. What may be happening instead is that, a little like home-ownership, marriage is turning into a luxury good—an ideal to which most aspire—rather than the default option. Inevitably, that means children are often born and raised in all manner of circumstances. But despite the fears of churchmen, politicians and the rest, they are not obviously the worse off for it. Perhaps it is time for politicians to adapt to the modern world instead of trying to change it back.